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Wulf, Verena

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From Figure to Figure: A Reflection On Telling And Listening

Verena Wulf

School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies
Dublin City University, Ireland

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Abstract

In 2017 the MELLIE Project (Migrant English Language, Literacy and Intercultural Education) brought together, for the first time, volunteers from DCU (Dublin City University) and residents from Mosney Direct Provision Centre in Co. Meath, Ireland. The aim of the project is to create an opportunity for refugees and colleagues in DCU to meet, get to know, and learn from each other, through the mode of storytelling. Initially, over a course of six weeks, then, later, twelve weeks when MELLIE was run again in 2018, participants got together in pairs to interview each other. The conversations were guided by questions covering different topics each week. The participants were asked to take notes while interviewing their partners, and use their records to write a story. The following is an account of the project based on personal experience and reflection. Some excerpts of the interviews are included.

We watch the news. We read the numbers. We look at the images. We are shocked, of course, because who would not be? One hundred and twenty people dead after an attack. Fatality rate rising. Fatality. Casualty. Minimality. All the same. In the end – to us – it is only numbers. We get up to grab another cup of coffee and continue with our daily routine. 100, 1,000, 10,000 dead. We cannot understand the scale. There is a limit to the imagination, and there is a limit to empathy.

But, that day, when we got on the bus to drive to Mosney, a Direct Provision Centre for asylum seekers and refugees in Co. Meath, Ireland, the ungraspable numbers were going to be reduced to just 1. Now, the number ‘1’ is very small. The number ‘1’ is very close. The number ‘1’ suddenly feels very real. The number ‘1’ was going to have a face, and a name, and a story. And that number ‘1’ was going to sit right next to us, with eyes fixed on ours. That number ‘1’ was going to be breathing, be made of flesh and blood, just like us. Strangely, the number ‘1’ felt a lot bigger than the number 1,000.

The closer the bus got to its destination, the quieter it became. The lively conversations seemed to have died out as we approached the centre. There seemed to be a shared nervousness among the participants, a tacit understanding that this would be an encounter shaped by insecurities and fears. What would be appropriate to say? How should I behave? What if nobody wanted to speak with me? The insecurities arose not so much from the impending intercultural confrontation, but rather from the unnatural and arbitrary hierarchies in place. The privilege we enjoy was suddenly blemished by a hint of guilt. Guilt, that we allow the government to treat refugees the way they do; guilt, that we did not do anything to prevent this;

and guilt, that we just happened to be lucky enough to be in the position that we are in. And, along with it, the fear that we might, after all, not be welcome.

Shy, like first graders, everyone tried to find a place with their back as close to the wall as possible. The big hall in Mosney was almost empty except for a few chair circles. People preferred to wander around, rather aimlessly, and exchange a few words with their peers, instead of sitting down. Until, finally, somebody made a start and took a seat.

And thus the chatter began.

As if someone released a valve, the voices grew louder and louder. You could hear laughter. Bits of English, French, Arabic, German were tossed around like in a quick ball game. What a relief everyone knew how to play without knowing the rules.

It is frightening to see how *othering* works, even among people who are aware. It is a relief to see how easily *the Other* becomes familiar when thrown into a pool and told “Now, try to swim, use your partner in order not to drown!” So we swam. Gasping for air at the beginning, chaotic and in circles like dogs, but safe, secure and strong, we made it to the shore.

Over the following five weeks, we would meet with our MELLIE (Migrant English Language, Literacy and Intercultural Education) partners and interview each other, following, and quickly digressing from, different sets of questions that would guide us through afternoons of conversation. I tried to scribble down every single word my partner said, cautious not to miss or misinterpret anything he told me. I wanted to tell his story, and I wanted to tell it right. It was through conversations with Ahmad that I realised we both had been equally nervous before the meetings:

He tells me that the first time we met when our group came to visit the residence, he felt very lonely. He felt lonely because he realized he doesn't know anybody, and he missed his family who was not with him even though the room was crowded with people. He says he felt very shy at the beginning, not only during that meeting but in general with all Irish and European people. He remembers his first steps on Irish soil were very happy, people carried his bags for him and everyone was extremely friendly. I remember, too, that he seemed very shy, very cautious but also very sincere. This impression has not changed since our first encounter. He discloses to me that, back in Syria, he would never speak to women; it was not a common thing to do. But here he does, he is talking to me, he is talking to everyone, and he really likes that. He admits he was a bit nervous before attending the meetings, because he did not know what to expect and he did not know what I liked – something we share in common. I was equally nervous before the meetings, not knowing what I'd be able to say, not knowing what would happen, and not knowing what appropriate behaviour is in such a context. It seems as if this is maybe something we all, as humans, share in common: the fear of the unknown - the “other” - the fear of being inappropriate and feeling out of place, and basically the fear of embarrassing ourselves. Maybe it is all the more important to swallow this feeling, accepting it as a state that can only pass if we allow ourselves to be thrown into cold waters. (Excerpt and reflection of an interview with Ahmad, 2017)

It was nice to see how everyone became more and more comfortable with each meeting, and the atmosphere – against my own expectation – could usually be described as light-hearted. Until one week, when we watched a theatre play - *Eire: Land of 100,000 Welcomes*, performed by students aged 15-17, addressing the topic of refugees and Ireland's stance towards it. The play was an artistic mix of audio-visuals, dance acts and monologues, critically exposing the underlying hypocrisy in Irish society and the helplessness when facing the current catastrophes that force people to leave their homes. A difficult play to watch - especially when half of the people in the room are seeing their own traumatic experience recreated on stage:

The idea of the play was wonderful and I was pleased with the pictures presented at the beginning of the show,” Ahmad conveys to me, “but when they started to show the suffering of the refugees here and there, this caused me great sadness.” It must have been around the time when an over-large image of the little boy Aylan Kurdi, who was washed up on the shore of Turkey, was projected on stage, that my chest contracted and made it difficult to breathe. I decided to leave the room and not watch the play until the end. Ahmad was not able to find sleep that night either. “I did not sleep from this,” he tells me, “I did not want to think of this child. I say this because I have not forgotten. And I do not think I will forget the suffering.” The discomfort I experienced while watching the play oscillated somewhere between sadness, empathy, guilt, shame and helplessness. I was worried whether it was right to watch this play, which was originally designed to shock an Irish audience, or whether we may have triggered memories that not everyone was ready or willing to embrace. I still do not know. (Excerpt and reflection of an interview with Ahmad, 2017)

The play left me shaken. In a twisted way I felt relieved when Ahmad told me that he had seen so much suffering in his life that something that happens on stage could not really affect him anymore.

Despite everything he had seen, Ahmad kept repeating how happy he was. Listening to his stories made me forget the numbers and the headlines. We can comprehend things on an intellectual level, but true understanding requires emotion. Pure figures do not trigger feelings, but a person’s narrative does.

The MELLIE Project was such a success that it was run a second time the following year. Many of the previous participants decided to take part again, and, so, I found myself once more in conversation with Ahmad. Throughout the project we were given several topics to talk about: for example, food, sharing, International Women’s Day, and education. And, each time, we managed to start with one question and digress completely and never made it through the entire set of questions. Ahmad jumped from one anecdote to the next, from happy to sad to thoughtful to joking and back to serious. The answers to the questions were often convoluted, and caught up in the moment, concentrating on taking notes, I sometimes understood the significance of his accounts only in retrospect. He is a naturally cheerful person, so I had to listen carefully to notice the subtext. But, one day, he did not convey his usual cheerfulness. We were meant to speak about education and our memories of our school years. It was one of the most profound and sincere interviews we had, and one of the most difficult stories to write:

“I didn’t want to come today,” Ahmad says. “I wanted to stay home.” He kept looking at his phone, flicking through blurred images and videos. “I talked to my mum at 6am this morning. A bomber came to my town two days ago. They dropped bombs on the market. Here.” He shows me an image of a wounded baby covered in dust. And another of a completely destroyed house. And then another of a wounded man. “Do you know these people?” “Yes, yes, I know them!” His family’s home is destroyed. His brother and his mother are sleeping outside in the garden now, under a tree. His brother’s leg is injured, but apart from that his family is unharmed. More than 200 people died, he says, but they still don’t know what kind of airplane it was. They are trying to organise trucks and buses now to move people to the Turkish border – the only strip that is safe from bomb attacks.

He remembers it was 1998 when he started school. He was six years old. On his first day he immediately ran out of the classroom when the teacher came in. He ran to his friend’s house to play marbles until the afternoon, so his mother wouldn’t know he didn’t go to school. He didn’t know that his teacher, Mariam, lived in the same street as he did and that she knew his mother. “I did not like the other kids,” he tells me. “They were beating each other up, stealing each other’s pencils. I was thinking ‘What is this?’ and then I ran out. But my mum said to me I am good and handsome and everything will be ok,” he laughs. His father would always help him with his school work, explain everything to him before class and practise

reading with him, so that when he was asked at school to read something out loud he would be very good. “I was a very strong reader. People clapped,” he tells me with a cheeky smile.

At some point he made friends with Ali, whose mother was from America and whose brother is a famous football player now. “He was Christian.” Ahmad went to a mixed school, where boys and girls and Christians and Muslims were taught together. Ali also had a snake, an albino mouse, a cat and a dog, and sometimes Ali would put the snake around Ahmad’s neck. “I was scared, but he said it was no problem.”

He enjoyed going to a mixed school. With a wide grin on his face, giggling, he says “I had love.” His first love was called Ranem. “She was very rich,” he tells me. They would always meet during breaks and after school before they went home, and he would tell her ‘I love you’ and kiss her. When other boys tried to talk to her he would fight with them and say ‘she is mine now!’ That was in 3rd grade, they were ten years old. The following year he moved away to Aleppo and was very sad to leave her behind. When he returned for a visit one year later and met her again, she just looked at him and said ‘I don’t know you.’ ‘But it’s me, Ahmad!’ She turned around and ran to her mother. She did not want to talk to him. He has not seen her ever since. “When my wife reads this, she will be jealous!” he laughs.

Like in all schools in Syria, they had to wear school uniforms. The uniforms were not unique to the individual schools, but were stipulated by the government. “It was like an army,” Ahmad says. And the government made a lot of money from it. At some point they changed the colour of the uniforms so that people would have to buy new ones, he explains to me. Now, in his town, nobody wears the uniforms anymore, because people do not want to support Assad. But, also, children are not going to school anymore. The army, at some point, took over his and his sister’s old school building. They needed a place for the soldiers to sleep. It is an old, French building, with a basement. He points out this detail because the basement at some point became very important. A few years ago, his sister was 13, and bombs were being dropped right beside the school. All the children had to hide in the basement until the attack was over. When he heard the bombs, he ran to get his sister. She was okay, but six other children and one teacher died during the two attacks.

His sister is 17 now and got married 6 months ago. Her husband is 22, they are very much in love. They only had a very small wedding because there are not many people around anymore. And people are sad. Not many people came to Ahmad’s wedding either. He told me that, usually at a wedding, people would shoot in the air with guns, but because the day before his wedding day many people had died during an attack, he did not want to do it. “I usually like the shooting,” he says. For his brother’s wedding, which was 10 years ago, they killed ten lambs and had a big barbeque. But on his wedding, his friend had just lost a friend the previous day and it was too sad. And now, today, people cry for the people in Ghouta.

When Ahmad first came to Ireland, he was very hopeful to go back to university and finish his studies. But nothing has happened since he came here over a year ago. His status still has not changed; he still lives in a Direct Provision centre; he and his family still don’t have their own home. At some point he realized that if he were to go back to university now, he’d be 32 by the time he finishes. “It takes too long; I cannot go back to study.” Instead, he would like to have his own business. He has different ideas as to what it might look like: 1) Make Arabic sweets; 2) Export and import goods from Syria; 3) A laundry service. “I talked to my wife about it. I can make very good Arabic sweets,” he tells me. “But I cannot eat them; I have broken teeth,” he laughs. (Excerpt and reflection of an interview with Ahmad, 2018)

It was incredible to see how this man, despite everything, still managed to laugh. How he still had hope and a plan, and a vision for his future. How he still enjoyed blissful moments of his childhood. How he retained a sense of humour and self-irony.

MELLIE was intended as a language and culture learning program for migrants. At the beginning I thought I would be the one doing the teaching. I am not sure how much I taught. But I listened. And I learned. And I cried, because I finally understood – if only a fraction of it.